

CHAPTER 6, LAW 7(A) - G-D UP CLOSE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

"If one sees his fellow sin or following an improper path, he is obligated to return him to the better [path], and to inform him that he is sinning to himself with his evil ways. [This is] as it is stated, 'You shall surely rebuke your fellow' (Leviticus 19:17).

"When one rebukes his fellow, whether in matters between the two of them or in matters between him [the sinner] and G-d (lit., 'the Omnipresent'), he must rebuke him privately (lit., 'between him and himself'). He should speak to him gently, in a soothing (lit., 'soft') tone, telling him that he is only saying this to him for his benefit and to bring him to the life of the World to Come.

"If his fellow accepts his words, it is good. If not, he should rebuke him a second and third time. And so too, he is obligated to rebuke his fellow continually until the sinner hits him and says to him 'I will not listen.'

"Anyone who has the ability to prevent [others from sinning] and does not prevent [them] is held to blame (lit., 'grabbed') for the sins of all those he could have prevented."

The Rambam this week is continuing to discuss the obligation to rebuke our fellow. In past weeks, he discussed this obligation in the interpersonal sense -- how to properly react when another person sins to us. Here he broadens the topic, discussing the general obligation of rebuke, both when our fellow sins to us personally and when he sins in a manner not directly pertaining to us.

The Rambam first states that we must rebuke our fellow gently. We must do so in a manner which clearly conveys we are approaching our fellow out of love and concern and mean only the best for him. He must understand that we like and care about him and are approaching him with that frame of mind. And of course that must really be the case as well. We discussed last week how easy it is to convince ourselves we're doing the "mitzvah" (good deed) of "You shall surely rebuke your fellow," while in reality it is really a front for once and for all telling him just what we think about him.

Leviticus 14 discusses the plague of leprosy ("tsara'as") as it pertains to houses. If a person finds certain colored spots on the stones of his house, he must notify a priest who then comes to the house to determine if the spots are leprous. During the course of examination and purification, the afflicted walls of the house are generally broken down and the leprous stones removed and replaced.

Now the Sages tell us that leprosy is visited upon individuals as punishment for certain sins, one of

the primary ones being gossip (Talmud Erchin 16a). Yet here, note the Sages, there was a silver lining to the affliction. During the forty years Israel dwelled in the wilderness, the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan, anticipating Israel's eventual invasion, stashed away most of their treasures. Much of it was stored behind the outer walls of their homes. Thus, when the priest would destroy the leprous wall, a treasure would be discovered within (Vayikra Rabbah 17:6, brought in Rashi to v. 34).

My teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) noted that this bonanza cannot be viewed as a **reward**. We already learned that leprosy comes as a **punishment** for misdeeds. Further, most people would not want their homes damaged and made temporarily uninhabitable even if their insurance policy would reimburse them handsomely.

Rather, explained R. Zweig, the hidden treasure served a crucial purpose. When G-d afflicts us and informs us we must improve our ways, it is difficult for us to take. Whenever we're rebuked we resent it and become defensive. We find fault in our detractor, criticizing him for his own faults, no matter how irrelevant they are to the issue at hand. Who does **he** think he is telling **me** I'm not perfect?! Look how **he** acts some of the time, etc. And the original rebuke, whether appropriate or not, often backfires hopelessly.

And criticism received from G-d does not fare a whole lot better. Our reaction is not humble resignation to the fact that we must mend our ways, but frustration and annoyance. We become too aggravated and preoccupied to start thinking spiritually and penitentially. If anything, the sum total of our theological introspection consists of the two words "Why me?" What did I ever do to G-d that He afflicts me so? Why can't He just leave me alone (really an awful thing to ask for)? And besides, I have far too much going on in my life to take any serious spiritual inventory just now.

For this reason, G-d, in the course of punishing us, hands us a free gift. And it is His way of saying something like this: "I may be punishing you, but I want you to know I still care. I'm not doing this out of anger and Divine wrath, to put you down and to crush you, but because I want what's best for you. I want you to recognize your faults which warranted your punishment, correct them, and return to Me. And here is a small token of My feelings to show it."

I'd like to extend this idea and illustrate it a little further. To be honest, this isn't what I intended to write when I started this class (I never quite know what I'm going to write until it's written -- my hands seem to have a mind of their own), and it's a bit off the subject. But I feel the concept is an important one, and a key means of recognizing Divine providence in our lives -- if we are only so perceptive as to see it.

Several years ago, shortly after my father, [R. Azriel Rosenfeld](#) OBM, first became ill (he would die a few months after of cancer), was one of the darkest points in my life. My mother wanted me stateside (from the Holy Land) as soon as possible, even though my wife and I had just been blessed with another child. So I found myself heading to the airport a short time later. Between the baby and the other children we were then blessed with, my wife was not coping well (putting it mildly). (She

recalls just starting to make the next day's lunches for the older kids at 12:30 AM -- shortly before the infant would wake up for his next feeding.) It was not an easy time all around.

Anyway, everything about that trip was just horribly depressing. I didn't want to leave Israel at all, I was loath to leave my wife and family in such a state, and above all, I was terribly upset there was a need for me to come altogether, seeing my father's health deteriorate so rapidly. (After the diagnosis, the doctors gave him 3-4 months to live (we never told him; it wouldn't have made a difference anyway); he lived about four and a half.)

Anyway, I arrived at the airport enormously depressed and completely exhausted. Coincidentally (not really, but so it seemed...), two places before me in line was a fellow I knew slightly from years earlier in rabbinical college. I remembered who he was but not much more than that, and would have at most made some polite small talk (not that I was really in the mood). He however recognized me immediately. His first words to me: "How is your father doing?"

It turns out that unknown to me, his mother lived in the same apartment complex my parents had recently moved to. So not only did he know and recognize me, but he was one of the only people who knew my father's story in any detail. And he too had lost his father relatively young to cancer. He was traveling to America on business but was planning to stay with his widowed mother throughout.

I almost can't describe what solace it was at that dismal hour to have someone who knew, who sympathized, and who could relate. (He is also an exceptionally sweet and caring fellow.) And it occurred to me afterwards that this is just G-d's way in life. Even when He punishes and afflicts, He sends His messenger of comfort. For He lets us know that even when He deals with us most harshly in life, He is still watching over us and He still cares.

Our forefather Jacob, when he was forced to send his beloved son Benjamin down with his other sons to Egypt to purchase food (see Genesis 42-43), offered a prayer for the safety of his children (43:14): "And may G-d Almighty grant you compassion before the man, and he will send you your other brother [Simeon] and Benjamin." The Sages observe that the name Jacob used here for G-d ("Sha-kay") also means "which is enough," and in effect he was saying: "The G-d who says to the world 'It is enough!' will say 'It is enough!' to my travails, for I have not been granted tranquility since my youth..." (Bereishis Rabbah 92:1, brought in Rashi to that verse). Jacob, who had one of the most difficult lives in Scripture, recognized that the G-d who had put him through it all would soon see that he had suffered enough, and would ultimately bring about his salvation.

For G-d, even while afflicting us, wants us to receive that message. This is not vengeance. It is carefully and precisely measured chastisement, mercifully instructing us to mend our ways. I am not abandoning you; I am watching over you every step of the difficult way. And if we are only so perceptive as to see it, we will recognize G-d's helping Hand guiding and supporting us throughout the entire judgment, tempering every step with mercy and compassion.

This too is one of the great messages of the Rambam this week. When we do find need to criticize our fellow, it must be done in such a way as to convey our love and concern. And in so doing, both parties will hopefully grow immensely from the encounter -- both closer to G-d and closer to each other.

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